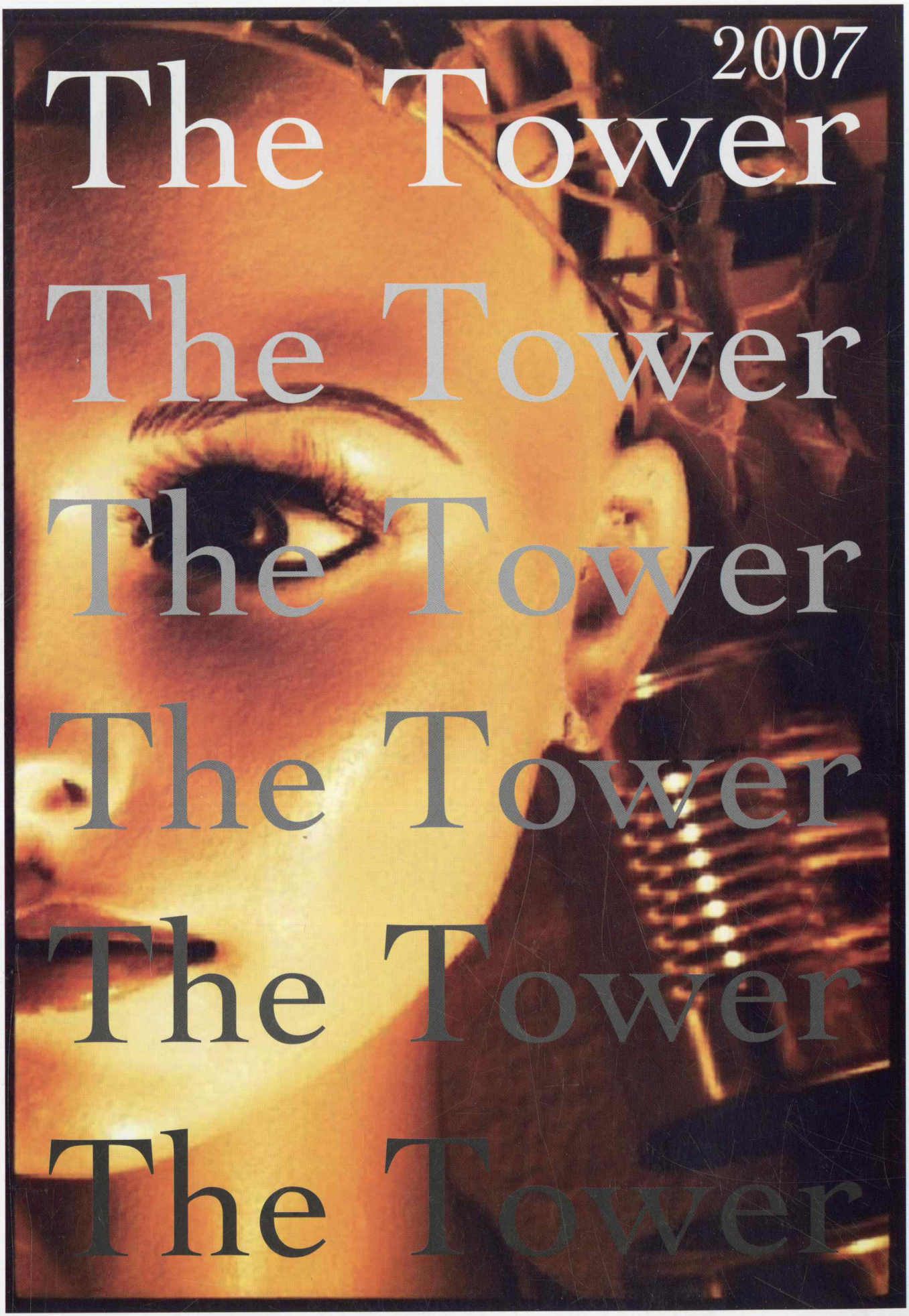
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"Ain't Got No Soul"

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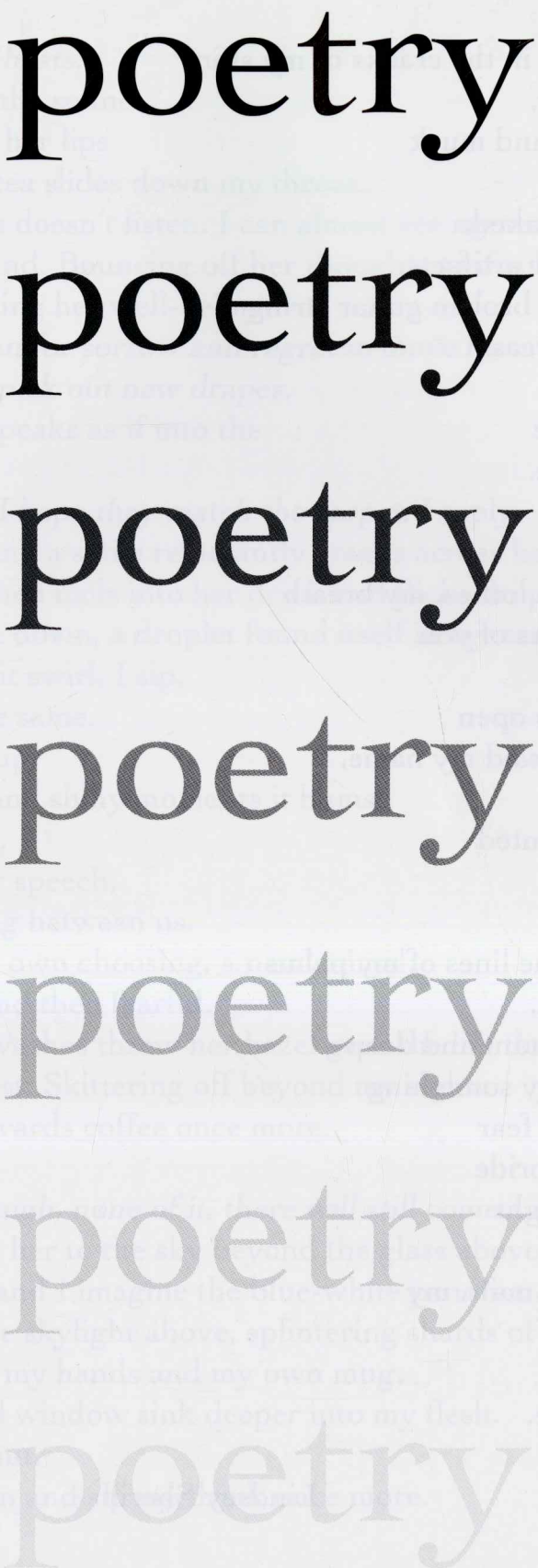
poetry
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Editor's Choice

Untitled

I have discovered you in the cracks of my skin
Dark and dusty,
Salt and sweat and musk
There, under my nails
In half-moons caked,
Along with your artifacts,
A toothbrush, a broken guitar string
A hair on my breast
Half hidden,
Like the beautiful side
You have found of me.

I have found you,
In my hair, my clothes, my breath
Pieces and scents of you
Left like gifts
Gifts I feared to open
Unsure the tag really said my name,
discovered
To be everything i wanted
But did not know.

I have found you in the lines of my palms
Written in flesh,
Ancient and distant and deep
There, etched by something
Bigger than my fear
More than my pride
Something I cannot fight
As part of me
As my skin, my nails, my
hair my breath
As you became
Or always were.

Lindsey Sherill

Editor's Choice

Editor's Choice

-Tastes the same-

All my friends are Ghosts.
Barely a whisper as the sound
escapes the curve of her lips
while the too warm tea slides down my throat.
That isn't so, but she doesn't listen. I can almost see my words
ricochet from her mind. Bouncing off her thoughts as if solitude
were a shield encircling her well-being.
Living is an invitation for sorrow and regret to move in,
paint the walls, and pick out new drapes.
Head lowered, she speaks as if into the
mouth of her mug
Well if nothing else I hope they match the carpet, I reply.
Her head jerks up, and a smile reluctantly cracks across her mouth.
She dips black polished nails into her drink and flicks droplets at me.
Laughter, and I look down, a droplet found itself in my tea.
Curiously watching it swirl, I sip,
and my tea tastes the same.
Conversation picks up.
Of distant specters and shiny moments it hums.
Vibrates between us.
Life is created in our speech,
rolling and coalescing between us.
Shaping it self by its own choosing, a new animal,
Feral, it becomes. And then fearful.
With one shift that washes threw her hazel gaze the life that was made
Manifest is gone. Lost. Skittering off beyond my sight.
And her eyes dip towards coffee once more.
The voice is so soft.
It doesn't matter though, none of it, there will still come a day when the heavens will fall.
My stare slides from her to the sky beyond the glass above us.
The moment slows, and I imagine the blue-white panorama shattering
Plunging through the skylight above, splintering shards of pane stab into
My eyes and throat, my hands and my own mug.
Debris of clouds and window sink deeper into my flesh.
Yet I smile throughout.
Blink away the vision and sip my drink once more.

Continued on Next Page

Editor's Choice

Editor's Choice

My tea tastes the same.
Sure it will fall, but then won't that make plenty of room for you to toss some new machinery into the night?
Her eyes rise again at the sound of my voice, and they find mine.
We sink into one another through those portals till all about us is lost.
Then she blinks, her smile is still there, but the sadness
of her stare bleeds down into the curves of her mouth.
I hate Ginsberg…
She stands and circles the small round table.
Her hand on my cheek might be nothing more
then a soft breeze if my eyes were shut.
But my eyes are open.
So I'm able to watch as her face slowly drifts closer to mine.
Her kiss is a slow, lingering, wisp.
And then I am watching her dress waft as she drifts out of the door.
My facsimile of a smile holds onto her sadness.
My insides mirror the chill of the room that
I notice for the first time.
I never will see her again.
Her taste is on my lips as I finish the cup before me,
And though it is colder for the moment,
My tea still tastes the same.

Eric Cottingham

Editor's Choice

-drops of everything-

sitting in a room I sit seated in a circle on the hard wood floor with the boy scouts sporting their ever so nicely wrinkled blue uniforms

me in mine I try not to show my shame dressed as I am in my expensive static free two-tone suit

the flag fueled bonfire we were sitting around popped and crackled as our fluffy marshmallows roasted above the blue white and red flames

now and again when the blaze burnt low a nice young lad would toss another star spangled banner on the fire to keep it high

it simply was just something that had to be done to keep our marshmallows browning and nothing more then that

from time to time mrs stevens walked by vacuuming the already clean floor in pinkwhite apron and sunday pearls and fishnet stockings

cleaning the house and keeping her place she bends over to retrieve a fallen feather duster and the black leather whip falls from her apron

she quite neatly reclaims that item from beside her high leather laced boot and smartly wraps the rawhide securely round her arm

she misses the drops of blood the tool left in it's wake but not too terribly important is that as she can always nail them on the next pass

over and over and over once more the cleaning routine went to keep her busy until the night rose and the other routine kicked in

flint and fire and flag and eats
dust and whips and boots and pearls

yes how funny the meaning of things
means nothing to do with nothing at all
yet everything to everyone at once

Eric Cottingham

~Crosses in their eyes~

Hands stitched together in prayer.
Ropes bind tight the wrists, so they
Shall not stray. The same rope winds
Around the neck, and down to tie
The ankles. All to keep one firmly
On the righteous path, of course.
Deep red furrows are the crosses
Carved Into their eyes, for the lamb may
See no evil, lest they be corrupted.
These symbols bleed scarlet tears that
Trace down the cheeks. 'This life
Is a test,' says the self righteous voice,
'a test.' Spoken by the ones with the
Strong hands, holding them in this
Position. A patronizing pat on the
Shoulder from this pardoner, more firm
Words to stay pious and suffer as He
Suffered. For that was truly His intent.
For all those he loved to suffer after Him.
And the words of those said to speak
His word are far too often laced with
Hate filled chants against their fellowman.
Forgotten is forgiveness, and self-serving
Sermons are the all too common result.
Misguided preachers and the followers who
Cannot see the moon for being too intent
On the clerical finger pointing to it.

Now the hands and glares force us to our
Knees, and their voices speak
'...so let us pray.'
Yes, let us pray.
But pray for the ones who truly need it.
The ones blinded to even the love and
Acceptance of the very faith they are taught.
The ones who cannot see the true
Beauty of this world for the
Crimson crosses in their eyes.

Eric Cottingham

How I Spent My Summer Vacation

A tiny exhale escapes,
as insignificant as her last name
or the unopened condoms,
forgotten in her purse.

She bites her lip,
blinks hard
then asks him to talk to her.
Sweat beads at his temples;
Do you like the way I make love to you?

She is quiet—
she knows he cannot
remember her name.
When he asks again,
she tells him
that this is sex—
no one has ever made love to her.

Can't I just think of it as making love?
It's better that way:
I love you—IloveyouIloveyouIloveyou.
Tell me you love me.
He rocks his hips
as he says the words.

Perhaps it is better;
she isn't sure,
just stares at the ceiling
of the hotel room.
The over-starched sheets
rub against the small of her back.

She would love
to fool herself
into believing this is real.
Finally, as if waiting
for some wave of ecstasy to pass,
she tells him she loves him

Continued on Next Page

and moans at all the right times,
like when he tells her she is the one.
Beneath thin hotel blankets,
she is a golden actress.

To keep him from seeing
that the wetness on her cheeks
is not perspiration,
she pushes her face into his shoulder.
He takes this as feedback,
continues to thrust violently.

Her salt tears mix
with his sweat,
and her eyes burn
as he shakes, tenses,
then releases with a grunt.

She waits
for him to fall asleep
then puts on her sadly hopeful
red dress.

This is not new for her.
When the morning arrives,
the liquor will have worn off
and be replaced by awkward regret.

By the way he holds himself,
(not her)
she knows that he does not want her
to stay.
The door squeaks as she slips out,
and she thinks maybe he's woken.

She isn't sure,
but as she stands in fluorescent hallway lights,
she listens for him to run
after her.

Rachel Wynn

How to Let Someone Die
with thanks to Lorrie Moore

Notice the tiny wrinkles race
across her tanned cheeks.
As you touch one, and she wakes,
imagine her cheeks are thin, wet leaves,
frailty mixed with that new feel of leather.
Her cheeks no longer remind you
of cashmere spritzed with Mary Kay musk.

Keep watching the wrinkles as she hums quietly.
Those creases could form necrotic highways,
long routes that curve towards her eyes,
connecting like tiny wires between telephone poles.

Try stretching your own face,
pulling the skin until your eyes bulge,
and your mouth cramps.
You are still too young to understand wrinkles,
when they come, how they form,
how dearly you'll wish to avoid them.
Imagine the way your tonsils once throbbed,
the way the whole inside of your throat tried to collapse.
This is that same type of pain,
a sickness that can only be seen through symptoms.

Try not to notice her husband;
don't ask for the piece of gum
he always keeps in his pocket for you.
Instead, know that he is dying in a harder way,
an untreatable, solitary, slower way.
Years after this day,
he'll buy Discovery Channel videos
of volcanic explosions and lava flows.
Though he will only suspect this,
his blood has been replaced
by this same coagulated lava.

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When she drapes her warm hand on your head,
remember the way she threw her arm
across your shoulders
whenever she slammed on the brakes.

Though there are no acrylic or oil paint
stains on her hands anymore,
know that this is the same arm you watched,
the arm that danced in the air when she painted.
Do not cry when you look at her.

When she tells you she loves you,
and you can only nod,
know that she understands.
She too can feel that swelling in the throat,
tight as a hand shake,
hotter than asphalt baked in the sun.

Before leaving the room,
kiss her just above her eyebrows,
like she kissed you before sleep.
Try to linger at her scalp,
inhaling the soft scent of her shampoo.

This will be the kiss you remember,
more fondly than the kiss of your first love.

Rachel Wynn

How not to fall in love

Remember, as his eyes shine on you,
making you feel like a full moon,
that he is not the sun
reflecting his golden light on you.
He is the Earth.
In ten days,
he will be blocking the sun's light,
eclipsing it,
leaving you cold.

When he calls and says he's hurt himself,
that he needs you to bandage his wound,
realize that you weren't the first girl he called;
you just happened to be home
with nothing better to do.

He puts make-up on you,
running his fingers lightly across your lips.
This is not a promise.
His glinting smile is only the effect
of summer sweating into fall.

When he tells you that he wants to take it slow,
that he really likes you
but is afraid of hurting you,
remember to keep tears from welling in your eyes.
Do not chalk this up to him being shy.

He'll ask you if you trust him.
He'll be hurt if you don't answer immediately.
Tell him you do, but when he leaves,
remember to lock the door.

Rachel Wynn

How to live abroad

You do not need to love
olive oil or hairy chests
to live near gondolas
or Mediterranean beaches.
The love will come,
and you'll soon crave
buffalo mozzarella
and dinner at midnight.

While staring from your balcony
at men running in tight shorts,
you'll wonder if you should
have chosen a city with less
distractions—a place
that inspires creativity
and diligence. You will
remember Napoli and not think
Lecce is so loud.
It is an anomaly as few
places are anymore.
The tourists skip Lecce,
and you breathe deeper for it.

For most of Europe,
tourists are unavoidable,
imported and stocked
like Japanese Koi ponds.
They've become less conspicuous,
abandoning fanny packs
and switching to smaller cameras,
but their pink sunburnt noses
give them away.

You know better than to fall
for a tourist. They will
eventually leave and take
your kisses as a souvenir.
The Italians aren't
a possibility either.
They have learned your type

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like a science, knowing when
to compliment your broken
Italian and how to ask
when you first discovered
your desire to pursue art
in Lecce. Your answer
will not include them,
nor will your future.
They know this and would
break your heart to save
their own.

You are best suited
with other Americans living abroad.
They've saved or stolen
all the money they could
and backpacked along the Via Appia
until Lecce opened her arms
to them as she did for you.

Together, your skin will burn
easily at the beach,
and you'll smile too often
at shopkeepers. Hand-in-hand,
you'll walk like stereotypes
from black and white movies
and admire the architecture
as if you were the only
Americans to recognize beauty.

When you've spent all your money
on wine and fresh cozze,
you'll remember where your passport
was issued. You'll realize
that you are both just touristscc
on a long holiday,
and as you lay together
one last time during siesta,
you'll ask whether it would be best
to carry-on or check your art canvases
during flight.

Rachel Wynn

Snake hunting

South Alabama snakes
are different. They sun
outside gopher tortoise holes;
Each step we take
is slow and deliberate,
but still the briars snag our legs
with razor cuts that will sting
in sweat and rain.

Brad uses an old hickory stick
he found a few years back.
He has professional tools
in an attic somewhere,
but says they feel
like golf clubs. He prefers
wood to steel, likes the way
the rattler's vibrations
travel through the branch.

I've watched him since
we were nine, and he hunted
garden snakes in my back yard.
He hid his hair beneath cowboy hats,
and I squealed and ran
as he chased me with the slender
green snakes, their tails
writhing and turning in the air,
like chimes in the wind.

The hunt hasn't changed
much since then and is always the same.
Pin. Lift. Bag. I imagine
the snakes are too tired to fight
anymore. Maybe they know
that Brad is agile and fearless.
Perhaps they sense his skill.
Maybe they know the worth
of their venom. Some men

Continued on Next Page

do not. Brad's seen these men
crush the perfectly triangular
skulls with steel-toed boots.
But this was years ago,
before people began
milking the venom
for research and learned
how to charge for snakes
by the foot.

Rachel Wynn

Gray Walls, Bright Dreams

This eight-by-eight cube is smothering me,
My thoughts are extinguished when the phone rings,
The gray walls stare at me in mockery,
While the longing in my heart softly sings,

"Where have you gone child, all full of bright dreams,
The one I knew well not too long ago,
The one who is gone and hidden it seems?
Oh, where did you go, child, where did you go?"

I searched high mountains, I searched the deep sea
And I explored to the ends of the earth,
Longing for the child that once lived in me
Who will restore my bright dreams and self-worth.

Goodbye gray walls and farewell mundane things,
I've found the child, and it was he who sings.

Corey Stewart

Watching Jackson Play (In His Footprint)

Jackson
Playing alone
Makes me think,
Does he know the man
For whom he's named?
His father's grandfather,
A hardworking gent with
Dark eyes, Grecian black
Hair shaped by V05.
A laugh infectious
As an epidemic.
Full of spirit,
Love of life.
Hands worn hard
As trees he cut, yet
"Gentle As Silence."
Admired by many
Who knew him,
Missed by those
Who can't forget
Jack.

Corey Stewart

Lesson Learned at Sutton's Trailer Park, Lot 5

She's on the porch smoking with tears in her eyes
I stop by to console her—I hate to see people cry.
Our marriage won't last, she says, as she lights a Pall Mall.
Through gray smoke rising, he stares at her down the hall.
How can it? She asks, He never gave love a chance.
I see him turn away, never to give her a second glance.
Then I hear a bottle break against the wall
He yells out, It's over, and I hear his body fall
Heavy, sounding like it shook the whole room,
Then came the eerie sound of a click, and a boom
Of a nickel-plated, double-action Ruger forty-five.

Oh god! I think, I hope he's still alive.
We run inside, find him face down on the floor,
A cruel, red reminder of a marriage that is no more.
She's screams and hits him, then she wails
About the secret she didn't tell
Of the newly formed child deep in her womb.
I turn away, hide my face, and hear another boom
Of a nickel-plated double action Ruger forty-five.

It's been many years since that haunting night
And sometimes my marriage isn't always right,
But I carry a reminder to ensure love never fails
In my front pocket, two empty cartridge shells
Of a nickel-plated, double action Ruger forty-five.

Corey Stewart

earth poem 1

cold air makes us full of light and sky.
constant distancing twitter
and lull of life reawakening.

reaching, probing tendrils
search and explore
growing, changing paths, minds
backlit, make black by light and time,
seeming dead
but fuller, more bursting at the seams
than half the lumber walking.

make me patient,
make me splinter and diverge,
feeling so many lifetimes at one moment.
make me steady, probing, learning,
hiding secrets under dank soil.

reaching downwards
bark archeologists
never excavate, but query delicately,
wrapping lacey fingers slowly
through histories.

piercing upwards
giants of earth
are favored first
sunshine, rain, nourishment,
and accept with gracious arms.

dormant natural statues,
models of world's growth,
glow from inside, burst outward,
shake, shimmy
life persistence outweighing subtlety.

let me become an ecosystem
let me support something other then me

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let me be penetrated
used as housing, sustenance, escape
breathing air and life into a world
I am accustomed to raping.

let me be content in whispering
resilient when damaged
forgiving when heart broken

timeless, ancient
constant motion
timed to a rhythm inaudible to humanity,
deafened by synthetic syncopation,
motion of machinery.

constance behind footsteps
deep thud behind tap and click
of heels on pavement,
is evidence of coherence--
as violently as we attempt to separate,
we are necessarily forever intertwined.

Stephanie E. Munkachy

the blues

sometimes my eyes feel blue
translucent
a window
and I look up, and to the side
with hope
and my brain is visible
but then I remember
the burnt sienna
the umber and the chestnut tones
the muddy water
making thoughts secret
glances lost in dark spaces
I view the sky with a certain longing
to fly
to become blue
icy and clear
wisps and flecks of doubt
hardly converging
with bright azure rays
but then I remember
my niche in the dirty places
the soil
the life of earth
and I think about how
my damp and dingy erratic shifts
match the heartbeat
of the underbrush

Stephanie E. Munkachy

Progression

my hands burn with hot disease
red and puffy blisters
pockets of fluids.
i imagine them as eyeballs
emerging from under my skin
telling my hands to see more clearly
and write more viscerally
and create visual language beauty truth.

i will suck in that gut.
run for a mile and a half.
choke down aspartame.
but imagine myself as a doe
big eyes
small hoofs
standing beside a mound of heaving
living
leaf jungle,
watching
unafraid of girl on bike, staring.

be an olfactory sensation
that reminds someone of childhood
of death
of a romance past
of coming of age
of growing old
of that time at the beach
of dogs and sunset grass--
elements of life reproduced,
used in countless advertisements.

the solution, you ask?
what is my suggestion?
this is what you call progress?
red and pulsating land,
hot blisters, ripped open and bleeding
the fruit of the land, sweet sweet crude,

Continued on Next Page

spilling onto the war-torn land
covering droves of humans, multitudes,
erasing and burning alive in millions.
Progress.

negate humanity's New Progress.
by negating New Thought--
a revolt of the imagination
of perspective,
progress toward old ways,
ancient idols
not covered in soot and oil:
etched out of Earth,
carved in Wood,
chipped from Stone.

humanizing is despotism.
is grasping for control.
is yearning to devour everything--
but what we put in our swollen belly
won't turn to grass and sink to the bottom.
anything from this
won't feed anything but itself.
metal to metal.
grinding gears in fabricated gut
spitting oil and dust
and scooping it back up to call it
Food.
Wealth.
Knowledge.

we'll sooner turn the mountain
into a "Mountain Roller Coaster!!"
a 12,000 foot high amusement park.
snow-capped museum.
wal-mart walgreen's books-a-million
nestled close to the middle

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so the Middle Class
can feel a fabricated culture made real
and feel we're educated in all necessary areas.

sip coffee
listen to light jazz
buy a stylish lampshade
pick up a few things for dinner
nestle down to NBC
nestle down to Dateline
nestle down to Dramatizations
remember your life as a sitcom
sleep in warm bed
say our prayers.

bring the dirt back.
i need mountains.
to get bitten by ants.
burrowed into.
sucked.
invaded.
eaten alive
is better than
internal hemorrhaging.

Stephanie E. Munkachy

"Jazz"

She had small hands
and that's really all you can remember:
small hands that seemed to shrink
in your piano hands,
one index finger the size of her palm.
The rest of what you were
has been lost to time
and even the color of her eyes,
once so important to you both,
has been replaced by the waves of the seasons.
She goes by a different name now
and you go by your real one
so you could see her on the street
and neither of you would know it
even though, by both of your definitions,
you were in love once.
If you saw her now,
fragile from your lies and strong from hers
you would be proud of her
even though she will never get through a
real conversation with you without crying.
But then, maybe it's best
if she blurs her out eyes anyway.

Abbey K. Davis

"Revenge Hero"

My brother
doesn't believe in
panic attacks, depression, or god
and I guess we have at least
one of those in common.
But he recognizes
that his fear of bacteria
is psychological.
Well, even Hamlet wanted to die
and no one knows
if global warming is real
or not.
This winter was hot,
everyone says,
but they all are in Alabama
so maybe it's just wishful thinking.
And there are still people
living in the Sahara in huts
so maybe we're not so advanced
as we'd like to assume.
But no one knows about Hamlet;
they guess through puns and interpretations,
and never get any closer
to knowing if Shakespeare spent his time
alone, counting syllables,
or if his revenge hero was just driven
crazy by depression –
but maybe Shakespeare
didn't believe in pills.

Abbey K. Davis

art

art

art

art

art

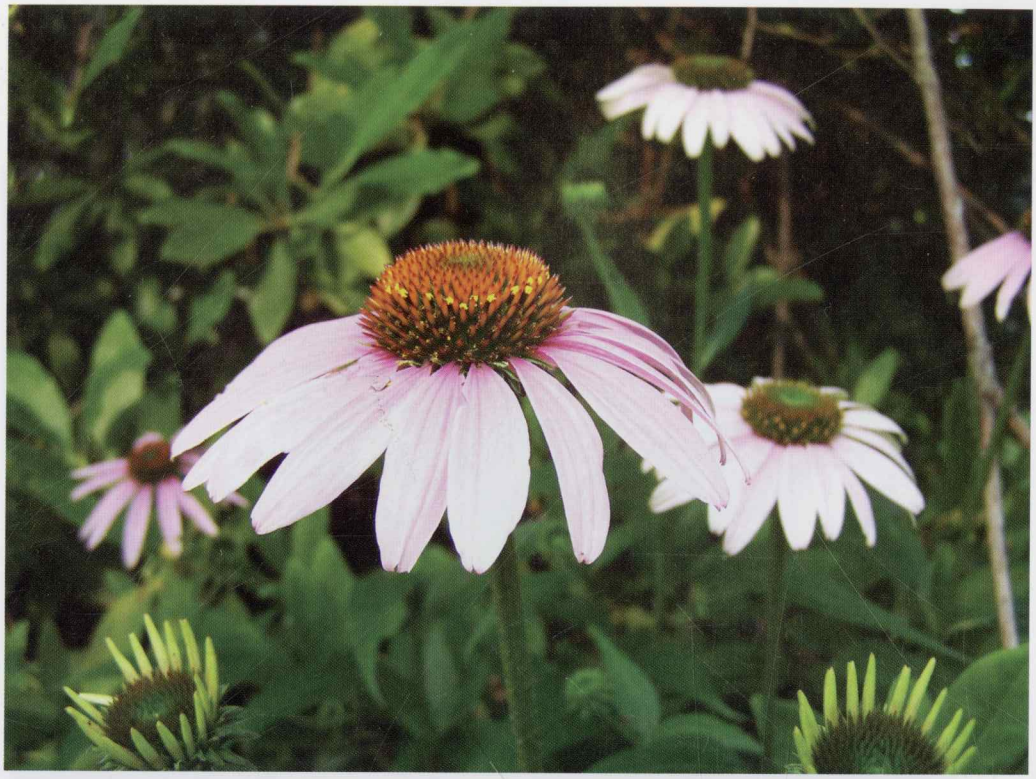
art

art

A Great Leap Forward
Lee Beaver

Untitled
Ashley Abrams

Untitled
Ashley Abrams

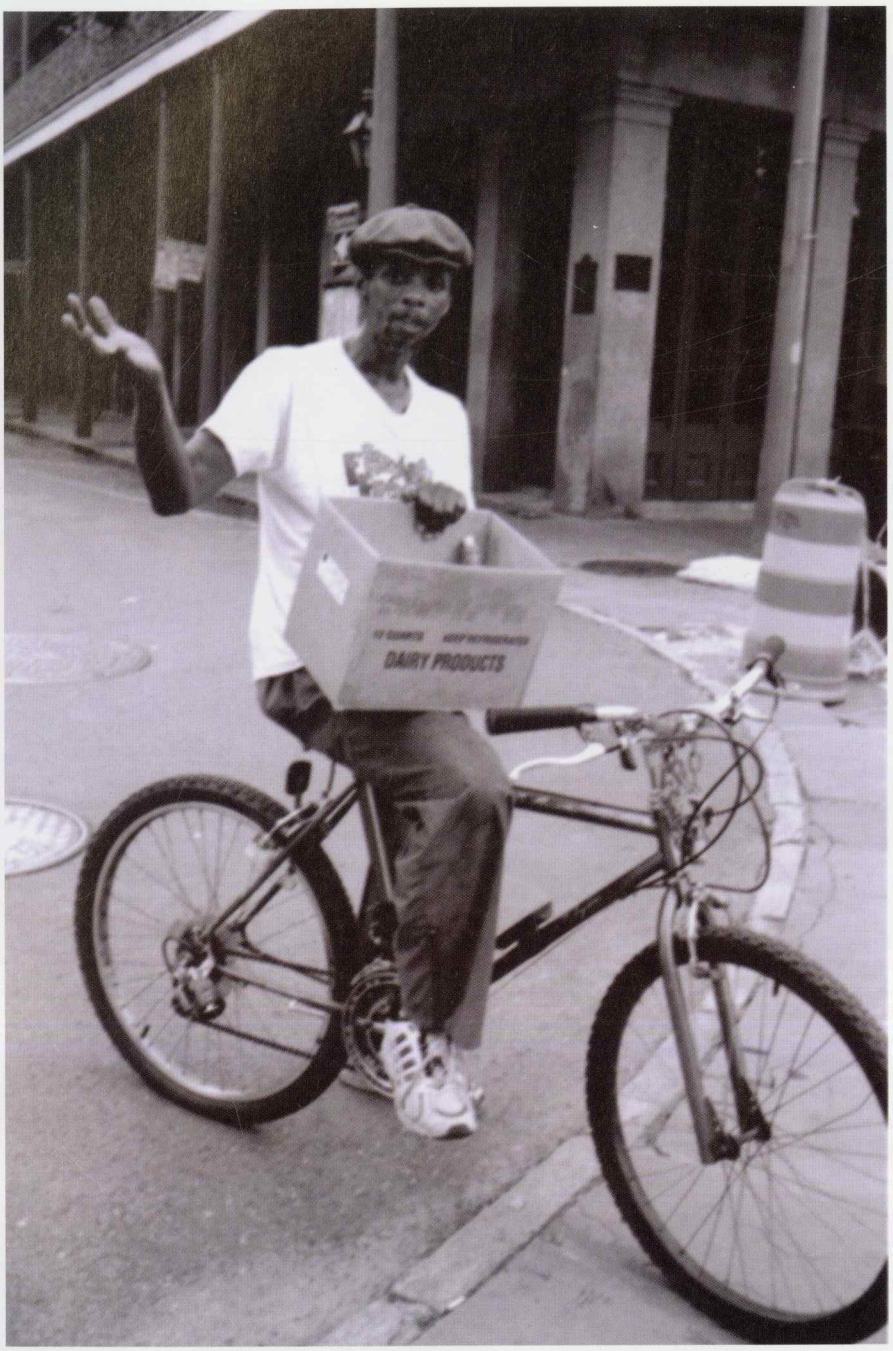


Untitled
Ashley Abrams

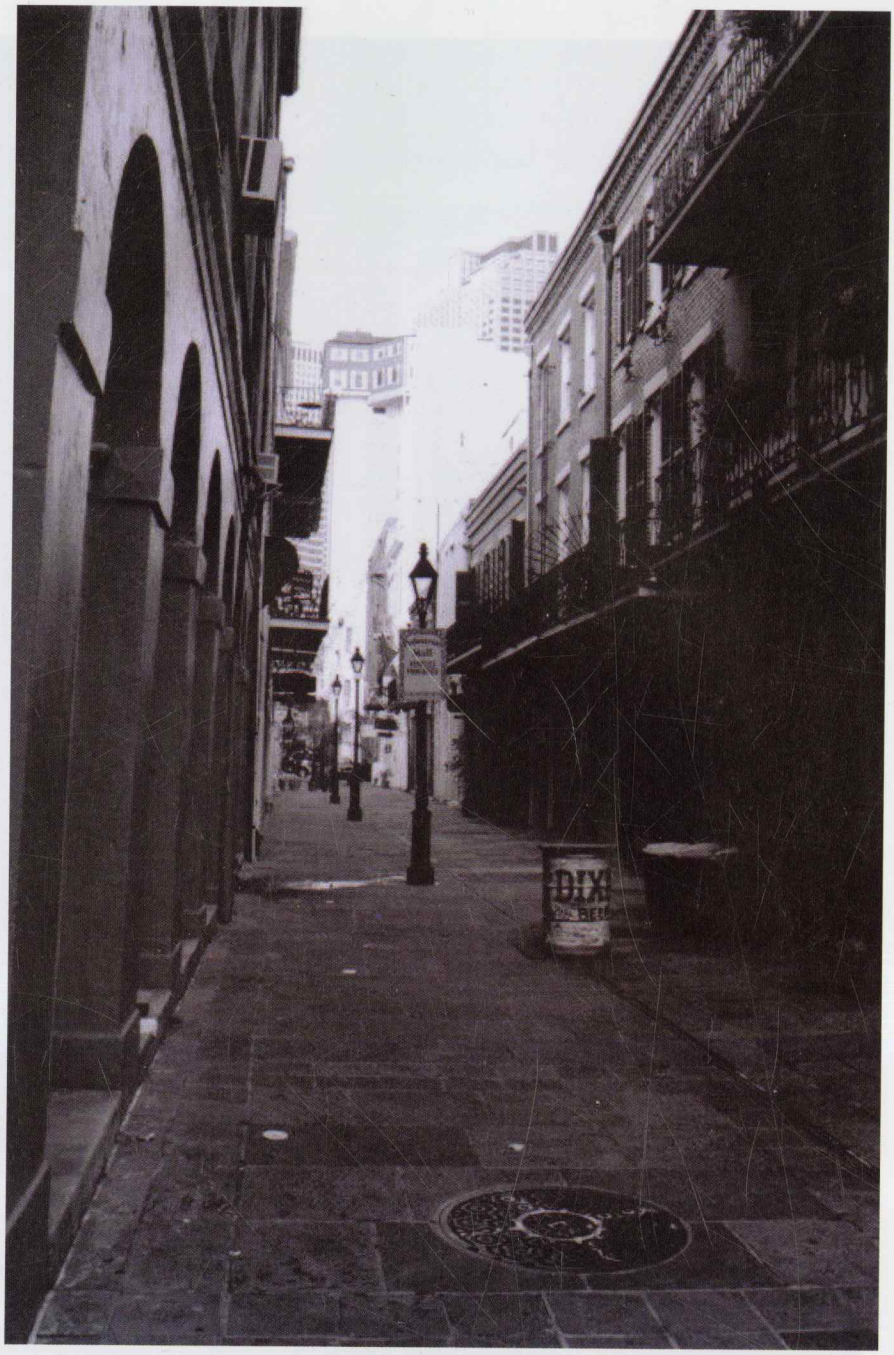
Lands
Julia Tiller

Whitney
Julia Tiller

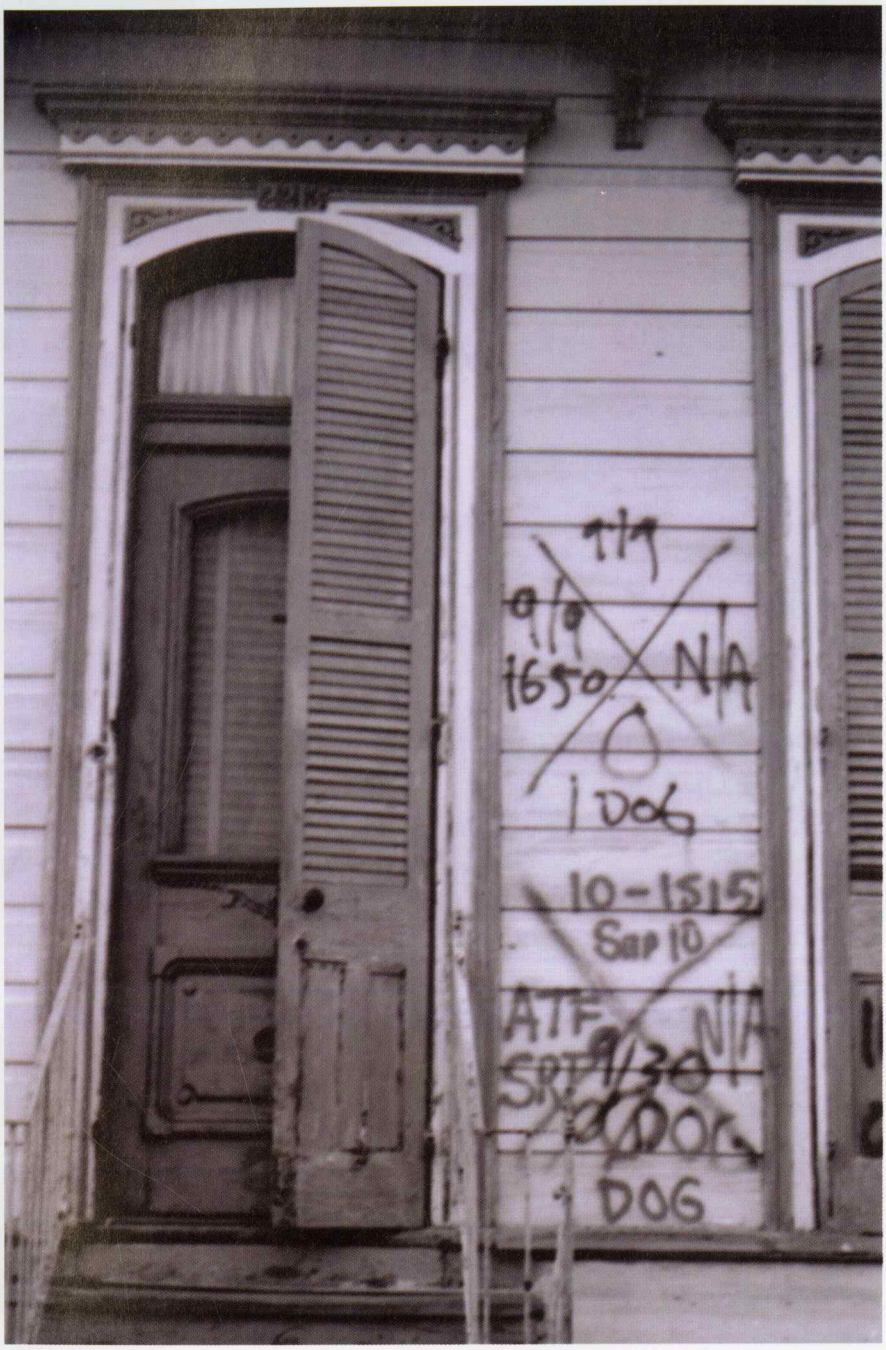
Fountan in Audubon Park
Sarah Creel



Is a Dollar All You Got?
Sarah Creel



Bourbon Street Alley
Sarah Creel



Post Katrina Row House
Sarah Creel

prose

prose

prose

prose

prose

prose

prose

Editor's Choice

Cleansing Francis

Rachel Wynn

In his bathroom, Francis turned on the shower, rosary in one hand, and stepped into the steam, his pajama bottoms and underwear still on. He gazed at the rosary until he could no longer see it, only feel it between his fingers. He liked wearing it draped around his neck like a necklace, but his priest said that was sacrilegious.

The water scalded his skin, and Francis tried ignoring the pain using prayers. He said his Hail Marys and Our Fathers. *Holy Mary, mother of God...* With his red-brown rosary beads, he counted the decades—*Hail Mary, full of grace*—the centuries, until, in his rushing, the rosary slipped from his hands onto the shower floor. *Holy Mary*— The beads slapped against the tile and drifted toward the metal drain.

Francis doubled over and the water stung his back. He told himself not to care. He wanted it to feel good and imagined it really did. He picked up the rosary, examined the cross and crucified Jesus. Then Francis realized he had stared too long at Christ's crotch.

Francis knew what he had to do. He had to be quick or be late for the party. He put the water on the highest setting and peeled off his clothes. Water beat against him as he scrubbed his body with soap and a loofah. He focused on his own crotch, scrubbing it until the thin, delicate skin broke and blood dripped out. Then, as he bled, Francis pushed his finger down his throat until he heaved.

* * *

Francis had done this since he was thirteen—since he was caught looking at pornography. His mother wouldn't have minded so much, and his father might have even been proud, had the pictures not involved men.

His older sister Beatrice caught him and told his parents.

"What, in the name of God, is wrong with you?" his father asked, the family sitting at the patio table on the deck.

"George, don't curse at him!" his mother said, her eyes pink and glossy. Francis could tell when she was getting angry. She would shake softly and drop her eyes. She always got that way when only Francis went to church with her. He knew she hated her husband and daughter skipping church, and Francis thought his mother would think him more devoted if he went every Sunday.

"I'll curse whenever I want," his father said.

Francis looked at his mother and father. They had just returned from the tennis courts and were wearing their starch-white outfits.

"I'm sorry," Francis said and tried to explain. "Someone gave them to me."

"Who?" his father asked.

"Jude."

"Jude who?"

"Jude Shield."

"And why'd you look at them?" his mother asked, embarrassed by her own question.

"I don't know."

"You *have* to know," his father said.

His mother looked at her white shirt and pretended to pick off lint. "Maybe he didn't," she said.

"Well, I mean, I didn't know what I was thinking when I looked at them," Francis said.

His father raised an eyebrow. "So, you were just looking? What made you want to look?"

Francis wanted to narrow his eyes, wanted to get angry. He stared at his mother, still pretending to pick lint, and said, "I just don't know how I should look when I'm naked, and the pictures with women never show enough of the guy for me to understand how I should look."

His mother and father looked at each other until finally his mother closed her eyes and went inside to make egg salad sandwiches for her Bunco game that night.

Francis's father began buying him a *Playboy* every two or three months. Francis usually flipped through them, read the articles, then stashed them under his bed like he had seen done in all the movies. His mother tried to set him up with pretty girls from church and begged Francis to become friends with boys she thought were "good influences."

Even after everything seemed to calm down, there was tension between Francis and the rest of the family. They knew information about him that he hardly understood himself.

They could no longer watch television together as they once had. Francis was only slightly interested in the TV before, but its being off limits made him want it. If they did watch the television, a sex joke would blast through the set and stab the family into silence.

It was even worse when they watched the movie *Philadelphia* on television.

"How does a gay man fake an orgasm?" a man on the screen asked only thirty minutes into the movie.

"I think I've had enough of this movie," Francis's father said, fearing the punch line.

"So have I," his mother said, then walked into the kitchen as Francis's father hit the power button on the remote. Francis pretended to inspect the cat as Beatrice rolled her eyes.

He'd once heard Beatrice say that she could never bring home any of her boyfriends because she was afraid that Francis would try to steal them. But she said it in a moment of anger between Beatrice and Francis's parents, so he forgave her.

After two months of guilt and self-disgust, Francis became ill. He began vomiting. Odd thing was, that after each vomiting episode, he experienced a feeling like the purity he had felt at his confirmation months earlier. Francis relished the release and collapsed onto the tile floor beside the porcelain toilet. He slept there until his mother cleaned up the vomit around him and put him in his bed. He awoke in the middle of the night to an epiphany.

The next day, he went around his home and gathered eye drops, peppermints, soap, baby powder, and an antiperspirant-deodorant. He stashed them in the cabinet below his bathroom sink, behind the extra toilet paper and guest towels. Francis decided to keep himself cleansed of things that made him feel guilty.

He didn't exactly know why he felt compelled to gather these items, but his epiphany

had included them, and epiphanies were messages from God. Francis knew from his priest that God rarely sent direct messages anymore, so he obeyed.

Francis only had to wait a day before he discovered what God wanted his routine to be. He was to eat the peppermints to cleanse his mouth of dirty language and lies. The eye drops were to keep his eyes from looking at sinful acts; the deodorant and powder were to keep him from smelling like the evil he created. He rubbed the soap all over his body until his skin absorbed it and left no room for Francis to absorb any other sins of the flesh. Francis practiced this regimen daily.

Eventually, Francis discovered that the soap had other uses. When Francis had an impure thought, especially about a man, he put liquid on his arms and lathered the soap up with his hands, making large scratches with his nails.

After a while, he began eating toothpaste and giving himself enemas. Whenever he felt dirty inside, he'd run to his bathroom, put the clean, clear enema solution inside him and everything would wash away.

During all this, Francis would sometimes make himself so sick that he'd vomit. He'd make himself sick by smelling something rotten. It felt good to rid his body of filth. He saw it as a sort of yoga meditation, only more involved.

Once he tried to tell his family about it during one of the last television programs they watched together. It was a *20/20* special on teen tattooing. One of the psychologists said it was like self-mutilation and masochism. Francis told his parents that pain might not be all wrong, that maybe it was good that the kids were doing it. Maybe it helped them.

"All I'm saying was that maybe just because you hurt yourself it doesn't make you strange," Francis had said.

"Right, Frankie, sure," his sister said. Francis hated being called that.

"People who smoke aren't called strange or crazy, and they are hurting themselves."

His father looked at him and shook his head. His sister rolled her eyes and mumbled *freak* under her breath. His mother went to her room and stayed there the rest of the night. Francis knew they couldn't, or simply wouldn't, understand.

The next summer his parents and sister went out of town for two days and left Francis alone, at age fourteen, with cable TV and the Internet. Francis abstained for half of the first day, but he gave in at three-thirty and spent the next few hours searching for naked men on the television and downloading dirty pictures from the Internet. The men all seemed to have a glazed look in their eyes, like they hadn't eaten in days. Francis would stare at the pictures of these men and then delete them and all traces of their existence.

A few hours before his family was to return, Francis became paranoid that they would know—that they would smell the sin on him. He showered and applied his deodorant and powder, but nothing seemed to work. There was no time for an enema. He imagined God and Jesus laughing at him, telling him he deserved whatever he got for his two days of lust. Francis walked into the bathroom, put his face over the toilet and plunged his index finger down the back of his throat, reaching for the base of his tongue. He gagged, and before he could pull his finger out of the way, he was heaving into the clear, still toilet water.

His family came home to find him sitting on the couch. His hair, wet from his shower, dripped on the pages as he read a book from his summer reading list and sucked on peppermints.

* * *

Francis finished vomiting and spit out the remaining acidic taste from his throat. He stared down at the bloody, watery vomit and remembered the party he had to attend.

"You'll meet some girls there, Frankie," his mother had said.

Francis heard his father tell her the week before, "I work with the father of the boy who is throwing it. The parents are going out of town and are letting Andrew have the party. Apparently, other fathers can trust their sons."

Later, when his father went to Francis and told him about the party, he had simply said, "You will go." And so it was settled.

Francis knew Andrew was indifferent to his company. They both went to the same school but had few classes together and rarely spoke.

He stepped out of the shower onto the slippery tile and dried off with the rough peach towel. It wasn't actually rough but felt like sandpaper to Francis's raw flesh. When he was dry, he applied baby powder to his skin to help clot some of the bloody places. The cologne he put on, Cool Water, burned his flesh; he put the hairdryer on the 'COLD' setting and pointed it towards his thighs to ease the stinging.

The mirror in the bathroom was fogged and Francis didn't even bother wiping it. The teeth of the comb scraped against his tender, red scalp and he winced at the contact. He rubbed soap into his red skin, covered it with several layers of deodorant and put in his eye drops.

When the room cleared of steam, the mirror sweat dripped down, revealing streaks of Francis in the reflection. He looked at his skinny, red body. He was dry, but looked pasty.

When he was finally dressed and ready to go, Francis checked himself in the mirror one last time. He walked out of his room and told his mother he was ready to go. He knew the party had already begun.

* * *

After five miles, Francis realized he forgot his rosary beads. He wanted to ask his mother to go back but he thought she looked tired. When she pulled into a gas station for gas, he asked, "Will you buy me some breath mints?"

She looked at him and gave him one of her toothless smiles, where she barely moved her lips at all. He tilted his head and widened his eyes. "Please?" he asked.

"Sure," she said, sighing, and patted his leg as she stepped out of the car to pump the gas. She put the nozzle in the tank and leaned against the car, rubbing her forehead. Francis tried to pull the denim away from his stinging thigh.

She finished pumping and went into the Texaco. He could see her staring at the rows of breath mints. After she paid and got back to the car, she held out a bottle of Binaca.

"Thank you, Mom" he said and slipped it into his blue jeans pocket. Its small bottle, not bulky like an Altoid tin, was appealing to Francis, and he didn't even mind that he had asked for mints.

Fifteen minutes later, Francis was dropped off at Andrew's house. He walked in the open door and went straight to the sofa to sit down. There were people buzzing all around him, and although it was only nine o'clock, he was sure some of them were drunk. Francis saw someone make up a new bowl of punch and spike it with a half-empty bottle of Absolut. He made a mental note not to drink anything.

Across the room, Francis saw the host. Andrew was the same age as Francis, but taller and better built. He watched Andrew drink his punch, saw his Adam's apple move up and down. Francis felt the nausea coming on and went outside to the front lawn. There, he could breathe deeply. He let his lungs inhale the oxygen.

His mouth tasted like blood. He swallowed and pulled the bottle out of his pocket. Francis fought with the plastic safety shield but eventually got it open. He unscrewed the top and squeezed half the tiny bottle of liquid mint in his mouth. It burned his raw throat and Francis screamed louder than the music inside the house. He bit his tongue.

Other guests came outside. They stared and asked how he was. Francis thought they were the type of people who enjoyed learning gossip firsthand.

"Never been better," he told them as he walked inside.

Then the music no longer seemed so loud, and someone told him to have a cup of punch. He leaned back to decline, remembering the absent rosary and crucified Christ, but saw Andrew at the punch bowl. Francis walked to the bowl and picked up a cup. Andrew put the ladle down inside the pink liquid, lifted the ladle to the cup and filled it. He looked up at Francis and smiled.

Francis could see Andrew's neck up close now, and it fascinated him, the way the veins stood out as he drank.

The semester before, Francis and he had been partners in an in-class American Literature project to transform Walt Whitman's account as a war nurse into something written from a more objective angle. Andrew hadn't known very much about what he was writing, so Francis did most of the work. They discussed the story, but nothing beyond that. He hadn't thought of Andrew very much before the project and wouldn't have cared about him afterwards, except for something Andrew had said.

It was after the teacher handed the grades back. They got a seventy-eight. Andrew came up to him and said, "Too bad we didn't have longer to work on it. Maybe you could have come over, or something. To work on the project, I mean. It would have been nice." It was the last part that got to Francis, the idea of them having a good time together.

Listening to the stereo, Francis stared at Andrew's smile, the way it accentuated his neck. "I hoped you would come," Andrew said in a low voice that surprised Francis. The music drolled on in the background, low and mellow.

He wasn't sure what to say. "I, uh, thanks. I'm having a good time." Something neither inviting nor insulting.

He took a swallow of his punch and discovered that he had drunk the whole glass. Francis stared at Andrew's body, feeling tired and relaxed. Andrew refilled their cups and gazed at the piano.

Andrew walked into the living room and sat at the grand piano and began playing.

Francis could hardly hear it over the stereo, but as the CD changed from one song to the next, he recognized the tune as "Stairway to Heaven." He wondered how it was possible for the song not to be played on the guitar. He wasn't sure and decided that he didn't pay enough attention to music anyhow.

An hour went by. Francis sipped cup after cup of punch and watched Andrew play. As Andrew drank the last of another cup of punch Francis went into the kitchen and sat at the round breakfast table, gazing at the ivy wallpaper. He could not hear the piano music anymore.

"How are you feeling?" Andrew asked, standing behind him, his speech slow and slurred.

"I'm all right. And you?"

"What? I can't hear you. Let's go somewhere else. This music is too loud."

Francis nodded his head and followed Andrew down the hall into a bedroom. Most of the guests were asleep or too drunk to notice their exit. Andrew shut the door behind them, and Francis realized, as he looked around, that this was the parents' bedroom.

"My parents are out of town, went to visit my grandmother in the nursing home or something. I somehow convinced 'em to let me have some people over. They won't be back for a day or two."

"I know."

Andrew smiled. "Oh, you do, do you?"

* * *

Francis did not make the first move. He leaned against the dresser as Andrew walked up and kissed him. He could taste the pink punch on his lips and held his to Andrew's for a long time.

Francis was relieved that he was not the initiator—the initiators were always at fault—but he felt like he went too far. He walked to the door as if he was going to open the door and step out. This was his final chance to escape his fantasy.

Andrew walked over to the door, placed his hand over Francis's and locked the door.

They kissed again. Francis felt a surge of urgency and grabbed Andrew by the back of the neck. He pushed his tongue inside his mouth and felt for the back of Andrew's mouth. Andrew put his arms around Francis's back and pulled him closer, swaying to the stereo music coming from outside the door. The friction of their bodies aroused Francis and made him put his hand inside Andrew's pants. He pulled them down, kneeled in front of him and opened his mouth.

Andrew leaned against the dresser, his hands white at the tips as he gripped the wood. Francis's hands were on Andrew's hamstrings and they both tried to keep their eyes closed.

They finished and Francis fell onto the bed, his legs dangling off the side. He felt his pants being pulled down. The denim scraped his skin and he worried that Andrew would notice his scars, but he didn't. Francis didn't know if Andrew was too drunk to notice or too horny to care. Either way, he was grateful.

Andrew's touch was like a thousand needles. The cleansers and scrubs had sanded away so much skin and left Francis hypersensitive. He tried not to concentrate on any single

sensation, but each one came in breaking waves that washed over him, leaving him weak.

After, they lay beside each other in a spoon position, their hands on each other. Francis started to fall asleep when he remembered the time and jumped up from the bed. Andrew woke, but neither said anything.

It was half past eleven o'clock and Francis's father would be there soon. Francis dressed in the dark, trying to make out his red, dirty body. He counted the cups of punch he had before they went into the bedroom. He was having trouble thinking, but kissed Andrew before he left the room. Francis had a feeling they wouldn't speak again. This didn't bother him as much as he thought it should. He felt guilty, but tried not to think about it.

The guests of the party were sprawled across couches and carpet, barely conscious, and none of them seemed to notice Francis, who stared at the floor. He was glad not to be seen and rushed out the front door.

Outside, it was raining hard. Francis stood in the rain as the drops revived the dry soap on his skin. He let the rain beat on him and realized he didn't want to rake his nails over his body. He lifted his arms in front of him, watching the rainwater cascade in tiny rivulets. His father pulled into the driveway, and Francis stepped into the blue sedan. He was ready to go to sleep, to wake in the morning and shower off the soap for good.

* * *

When Francis woke in the middle of the night, and the events of the party and the hangover hit him as he opened his eyes, he thought of what he'd done, grabbed his rosary and ran into the bathroom.

He set the water to the red setting and stepped into the shower, trying to get his clothes off as he moved. The hot-lava water burned him like alcohol as he tried to do the rosary penance. He kept losing his place. He felt the nausea coming on and stuck his finger down his throat.

Up came blood, but not the vomit, and Francis realized that the blood was the vomit. Suddenly his throat ached and he couldn't breathe. He tried to scream but only a shriek came out, high and tiny. Released.

Untitled

Molly VanNostrand

She was sitting in the bar, trying to drink away her recent problems. She never thought that an old problem like him would creep up in the time it took to put back another shot of whiskey. Who was that man standing there staring? Why did he look so familiar to her? Justin. He had found her. It had been four years, and there she sat, just as pretty, slightly older and more run-down looking. She wore a new dress, this one without beer stains as all her dresses she wore with him had been. All the bruises were gone, only scars were left.

The bar was smoky and loud, slightly over-crowded. A classic Led Zeppelin tune hovered in the air, amidst the loneliness and drunken haze that the people at the bar exuded themselves. The wall was covered in old pictures and posters of rock gods, beer signs, and the latest Sports Illustrated calendars. She sat there, running her long fingers with perfectly polished red nails along the rim of her glass. Something pulled her head towards the entrance, and there he was, standing in the doorway, staring back at her. Justin. His bright green eyes were exactly the same as she remembered, cutting through her just as piercingly as when they first met. His clothes were old and tattered, and his chiseled chin barely showed through a dark new beard, but his eyes were just the same. She remembered the first time she saw those eyes.

"I want you to meet my cousin. He just moved here from Pittsburgh," her friend John had told her. "I think you'll like him!" Well, she did. Even after the drinking started. She still liked him. More than once she thought it might be love. Her head thought otherwise, but Marie was always the type of girl who thought with her heart. They had met in a bar, much like the one they were both in now. John introduced them, winking at Marie, who tossed her hair back in her flirty way. She always flirted, even when she didn't mean to.

The weeks went by and things only seemed to get better. Justin's drinking only seemed to get heavier. Marie thought back now, in a flash, to the first night he threw a punch, the first night she thought maybe it wasn't him, maybe it was just the alcohol. The fight ended almost as quickly as it began, with her lying on the floor in her own blood, and Justin passed out on the bed. After the first fight, things only got worse, and every time Marie would apologize. She wouldn't know what she was apologizing for, but if she didn't he would only get angrier. She finally left him, moved out of town. Now here she sat, in a bar 247 miles away from the home she left, the blood stained floors, the haunting memories and constant fear, and there he stood, with eyes just as haunting as the memories she had left behind.

He was still staring, and she couldn't take her eyes away from his, as if something were holding her there. She finally pulled her eyes away, looking for an exit other than where he stood. She looked to the bathroom. No. Surely she could hide in the crowd of people? No. It would only be a matter of time before he found her. She looked back to where he stood, only to find he was not there. Where was he? Marie felt a hand on her shoulder, but she was too scared to look.

A voice, too familiar a voice, whispered in her ear. "Well, look who's here! What a coincidence!"

languages, but something far stranger. Ashriel rolled up the sleeves of her hoodie, revealing the daemons tattooed on both sides of her ashen grey forearms. She pulled the hood down over her eyes and tied a purple bandana over it. Felsaints relied on their instincts, blocking their vision and any other of the five senses, supposedly made them more attuned to their instincts. She dug in her canvas messenger bag, and pulled out two pieces of chalk, holding a piece in each hand. She dropped to her knees, and drew a circle around herself, as the alley was showered in disrupted debris. She lay on her back in the circle and drew black, nephilic wings in the pavement.

"Chicom exochtli." She stood, the wings that she drew on the ground now a part of her body. "Well, this is going to be awkward." Ash said while her eyes devoured Myst's body.

Myst blushed and Ash wrapped her arms around Myst's stomach and locked legs with her. Angel Dirge, a 1st year at the school, never shut up about Ash's ever changing sexuality or that Ash was undead. Now Angel was probably one of the cadavers who lined the landscaping. Myst thought. Ash leapt, her wings beating steadily. Slowly they rose above the buildings and looked over Amaethon.

Myst choked, her vision blurring for an instant. Her mind couldn't comprehend the row after row of troops waiting just outside the city walls, the masses of kites, gliders, and zeppelins that swarmed over the city like bees and the lines of artillery cannons that made Festival Hill look like a forest of steel trees.

The zeppelins fired another salvo of naphthenic palmitic rockets, plumes of fire arose from the city's ghetto. The Seri army was trying to cause the maximum civilian damage so that when they marched in, there would be no resistance. The kites flew in arcs of seven and arc after arc after arc rained bombs on the defenseless citizens. The inadequate anti-aircraft of the city could no longer return fire, the kites simply flew under them and the zeppelins flew far above their range.

Ash flew straight up. Chills went down Myst. "Ashriel, what are you doing? They are going to shoot us down."

Ash leveled out and glided toward a zeppelin embossed with a bright blue sphere. *There's a general on board.* Myst Elysium thought as she squirmed in Ash's arms.

"Don't be a fool, if I let you go, you'll fall and die." Ash whispered. "And for the reward they're giving me, I'd rape you until your femininity tore open, if they wanted me to."

Myst's trembling hand grasped the grip of her curved dagger. She focused on nothing but staring ahead. *Passion and instinct are the way of the felsaint, Logic, knowledge, and strategy are the disciplines that keep the magister alive.* Myst recalled Arch-Master Lukyanenko telling the class in her first year.

Ash flew in the open loading bay, and dropped Myst on the hardwood floor in front of a general and his squad of bodyguards, dressed in black.

"Check her." The general ordered.

Two of the bodyguards grabbed Myst by the arms and forced her to stand in front of the general.

The general forced open Myst's eyes, looking first at her blue eye and then her lavender eye. "This is her, this is the one touched by the gods." He reached into his trench coat, pulling out a small velvet bag. He tossed it to Ashriel Exile, who caught it with the blindfold

still in place. Ash turned the bag upside down and a purple glass pyramid fell into the palm of her hand.

"The Jiva of Nefesh," she said with awe and greed blending in her voice. Finally, she pocketed the gem in her messenger bag. "Is that all you need General Skyre?"

"Yes, you may leave," he responded.

"Don't let her leave until the battle is over." Myst said, as a soldier held her still. "You can't trust her, she's playing both sides."

Ashriel sighed. "Myst does have a point. The entire city saw me fly up here. So they'll think I'm fighting for the Seris." She put her wrists together in front of her, her daemonic tattoos glowing. The bodyguards reached for their sabers and calibers. "But if I destroy the zeppelin, then I'm a hero and have also killed an enemy." She nodded at Myst.

The bodyguards fired. The aspects formed and a wolf, covered in spikes, rows of teeth and hundreds of eyes, jumped from Ash's forearms. Bullets hit the crimson and black daemon. The mouths on it face, back and legs roared in fury. Ashriel jumped out the open bay and stretched out her wings.

She flew above the gigantic balloon, reaching into her bag for several tubes of oil paint as she did. She quickly screwed off their lids and threw the tubes around her. Streams of cobalt, burnished gold, and overcast grey shot out of their tubes and swirled around her. She pictured in her mind the painting she desired, she waved and moved her fingers like she would a rigger brush of the finest bristles. The paints moved, flowed, and glided into place with her every move.

The daemon opened its jaws and bit completely through a bodyguard, snapping his spine. The daemon threw herself at another soldier, impaling him on her spikes, spurting crimson gore over the hardwood floor.

Myst slipped and fell in the blood. *There's enough gunpowder and blade here to kill the daemon, but do they know that?* She asked herself as some Seris fled to the bow of the airship. "Shoot it down, Ash mixed only mixed two aspects, its weak," She yelled in the general's face. "In the name of the seven hells, reform your men and kill it, it's only a distraction."

Skyre recovered and started yelling at his men. Myst summoned her tomes. Her fingers brushing once again over the Crylysian made ink. The words flew of the page and formed into lines in front of her.

Sheltered from the ink of her hands,
I found my salvation from Ashes.
Trapped inside her canvas,
I turn my evergreen screams into bladed words.

Myst glanced over the lines and sent the words up through the roof of the zeppelin, Ash felt that the completed painting that danced and moved in front of her, a contortion of the airship exploding in a golden sunburst, was enough to sink the airship. She hurled the painting at her target. It hit the gas balloon perfectly, as did Myst's poem. The ink and paint collided in golden sparks. A small hole ripped open, gas slowly leaking away. The *evergreen*

screams and *bladed words* turned into icy daggers. Ash dodged the first one, only to have the second dagger cut through her cheek, exposing her clenched teeth and gums.

Ash cursed in words that would make a daemon burst in to flame. This time her painting was of a black haired girl with a nose piecing and different colored eyes writhing in the middle of a gaseous inferno. The colors were only more vibrant and violent, so Myst would feel every moment of pain as the zeppelin disintegrated.

The screams of the dying, the blasts of muskets and calibers, and the singing of steel was a full orchestra performing the overture to the Sacrament and Blasphemy for the felsaint and magister. They were simply the actors performing the fever dreams and grotesque nightmares of their muses, the magic gifts in them. As the magics directed, they executed.

Myst knew she had to force Ashriel to retreat, but how? She created an another salvo of words.

Lifted on daemonic wings, I saw the false goddess fly,
The blood of treachery on her lips, drunk on the screams of the damned.
Her pigments fell from her unseeing eyes, rivening her lust in two,
The violence she sowed sundered her flight with the reaping.

Ashriel's paints imploded, her black, feathery wings vanished like a gasp from a murdered man. She plunged toward the burning city below her; she looked up in time to see the zeppelin's balloon erupt into flames. By making Ash unwillingly retreat, Myst Elysium had left the ship open to Ashriel Exile's attack.

Ash's daemon was dead, riddled with bullets and cuts, but now the screams were of the men burning alive, their skin melting off of them in droplets like wax from a candle.

Myst kept flipping the pages of her books, her energy close to evaporating. She did her best to keep from sliding in the pools of blood and melted flesh as the ship started falling, but there was nothing for her to brace herself against. She was thrown against a wall as the ship went into a nosedive, but she found the words she needed to start with. She summoned their chance for survival in front of her.

My flesh is fire, my heart is ice.
A shield, and a refuge.
Mummified by the chill.
Crucified by my shield.
Encased, surrounded, buried
My refuge, a frigid casket.
My rescue, a gelid crypt.

Myst winced, but it would do. The words sank in the airship's walls and ceilings. They kept plummeting; Myst saw the burning city palace rise over the edge of the ramp. She stroked the words for her shield spell and the words enveloped her.

Ice poured from the walls and flowed through the halls, covering everything and freezing everyone in place.

The zeppelin crashed. Myst laughed, watching the flames dance outside her ice cage, the fatigue finally catching up to her. The melting ice doused the fire, and the few survivors climbed out of the wreckage.

She instantly recognized her surroundings, she was back at the Magister's Girls School. She subconsciously brushed the debris, blood, and dirt from her gold and purple magister blouse and then from her skirt.

She sat down and watched the Seris walk around in dazed confusion. She stood, laughing at the invaders. Her feet started leading her back to the breakfast hall, whatever censure her mind had conjured earlier had worn away from the exhaustion. Myst was naked to the scene before her. She recognized Serenity Carnivale, half her body a smoking ember. Myst stared at Serenity, her pure white hair and flawless skin made the toothy grin of half her face more surreal to Myst. The magister tripped over Ahighi Liberty, they were study partners for *Writing 456 Effects in Style*. Myst choked back the bile crawling up the back of her throat. Ahighi's eyes were closed, she looked peaceful, hopeful even, if not for the absence of her waist.

Myst stumbled back up to her feet, blinking back the moisture at the corners of her eyes. The doors to the hall were smoldering ashes, and Myst walked in without thought. Crimson was still on floor, still staring, blood caked across her face. Myst knelt and took Crimson in her arms, cradling her gently. She picked the pieces of glass and shrapnel out of her face, and washed the caked blood from her face. Each time she opened her mouth to say something, to apologize to Crimson, she couldn't say a word. She brushed Hallow's red hair behind her ears, just the way she did in life. *We're going to graduate in the summer, and then spend a month in Arasidop Islands to celebrate.* She held Crimson's hand tighter.

Gunfire erupted from the courtyard, where the zeppelin had crashed, Myst didn't move, didn't acknowledge it. The skirmish ended quickly and a girl of about twenty, with short cropped blond hair and in the uniform of the Gwilymian lighthorse, rode into hall on horseback, she dismounted and ran to Myst, grabbing her by the shoulders.

"Myst are you hurt?"

Myst looked into Riven Valkyr's blue eyes. "I have to take Crim to Arasidop."

Riven glanced at Crimson and swore. "Myst, Crimson is dead, but we have to leave. The retreat's been sounded. The Seri whores will swarming through the city within the hour."

"No Riven, I promised her, I promised her." Can't you understand?

Riven slapped Myst. "Crimson. Is. Dead. You. Are. Alive. Act like it."

"You whore," Myst said between clinched teeth.

Riven bit back her tongue, her military ways far too harsh; Myst had been through some nightmares, but war wasn't one of them. She pried Myst's hands open and picked up the frail teenager. Myst didn't struggle but buried her face in Sergeant Valkyr's shoulder. She sat Myst in the saddle of her palomino and mounted up behind her. Riven signaled to the rest of her squad and the twelve horsemen rode away from the school. Soon enough, they passed through the city's eastern gate, and as Myst passed into a dreamless darkness, she could sense that there were battles still to fight with Ashriel Exile.

Revenge of the Vending Machines

Rachel Beverly

My roommate, Beth, was a student worker at the library. When we first became friends, I used to go by and see her while she was working. I'd help her shelve books and we'd talk. I knew she gossiped mercilessly behind the backs of our two suitemates—how loud they were, what stupid things they'd done the day before, how horrible their clothes were—but I really didn't think she was a bad person. It took me six months to realize that she was, in fact, a heinous bitch.

I showed up at the library at about ten one night, long after we'd started fighting. Beth, in a minor skirmish we'd had the day before, had cited the fact that I never came to see her at work anymore as proof that I was the one pushing us apart. Still hoping somewhere in the back of my mind that we might work things out, I made it a point to be there the next day.

The tiny fragment of hope I wasn't even sure why I was holding onto was quickly smashed. She ignored me the whole time I was there, just sending enough half-smiles my way to keep me from walking out. When her shift finally ended a full hour later, I stood up and gathered my things, expecting her to walk back to the room with me. It took ten minutes of searching to realize she'd gone out the back way.

I was furious. Livid, even. But not really with her. She had done worse things. I was mad at myself. I'd let her do it to me again. *Again.*

When I got back to the room, she was there. My first instinct was to turn and leave, but I stopped myself. Fuck her. It was my room, too. I didn't yell. I didn't even look at her. Just sat down on the couch, arms folded angrily.

She puttered around and shot occasional, questioning smiles my way. *Nothing's wrong,* her face said, same as always. *Why are you upset?* Over the course of the semester, she'd nearly convinced me I was a paranoid nut with that smile. Now I barely saw it.

"We're going to Wal-Mart." Her voice startled me.

No we're not, I thought, quickly squashing the warm "included" feeling that shot through my heart; it had been a long time since I'd been part of a "we."

"See ya." Before the two words could even register, Beth had walked through the connecting door to our suitemates' room. Alone. The latch made a final sounding click as she pulled the door closed behind her.

It was only after I'd heard her walk down the hall with our two suitemates that I started to cry.

A short while and a Tylenol later, I blew my nose, washed my face, and decided to do something about dinner. Cheerfully. Beth had ruined enough of my day. I figured I would stick a frozen dinner in the microwave and watch some TV. I had the room to myself, after all. I could open the windows, air out some of the tension, and enjoy my night alone. It was a good plan. I turned on the Sci-Fi Channel and pulled a frozen dinner out of the fridge. I was out of Dr. Pepper, so I gathered up fifty cents and headed down the three flights of stairs to the vending machines, checking to make sure my eyes weren't still puffy first. A Dr. Pep-

per was sixty cents, so I headed back up. The frozen dinner was done when I got back to the room, so I pulled it out of the microwave and peeled back the top to let it cool. By the time I got my drink, it should be just right. I grabbed a dime and headed back down stairs.

The change made a clinking sound as it dropped into the machine. Ten, thirty-five, sixty cents. I pressed the button for Dr. Pepper and waited for it to drop down into the little compartment. Nothing happened. I pressed it again. The machine made a few grumbling noises, but no can appeared. Calmly, I pulled the return-change lever—Less calmly, I pulled it again. Nothing. My slowly emerging good mood vanished in a puff of Dr. Pepper-less smoke. The stress of the last few months seemed to surge forward all at once. My face grew hot with anger. Beyond furious, I gave the machine a good, hard kick. Unfortunately, I happened to be wearing slippers. Fully stressed once more, I limped up the three flights of stairs to retrieve more change. There was a vending machine on the other side of the building that was more reliable. I'd get my damn Dr. Pepper from it.

Back in my room, I gathered up another sixty cents and glanced mournfully at my TV dinner. It was the perfect temperature. Star Trek had just started playing on the Sci-Fi Channel. My perfect, stress-free evening was starting without me.

The second machine hummed pleasantly at me as I stood in front of it

"You're not going to gyp me, are you? Of course not."

Twenty-five, fifty, sixty cents. I pressed the button. I pressed it again. I pressed every other button on the machine in rapid succession.

Nothing.

Growling low in my throat, I pulled the change-return lever. The sound of metal clanking against metal filled the air. I decided to let the machine live. I pulled the change from the little tray and glanced at it. It was short fifteen cents.

Ingrid, my dorm RA, looked a little concerned as I stood in her door, near tears, asking if there was any way I could get my money back from the drink machines.

"No...I don't think so. But you can get it back if the laundry machines steal it."

Great. Thanks.

Mournfully, I gave up on the idea of a Dr. Pepper. It simply was not meant to be. I'd have water. It was healthier anyway. At least water wouldn't aggravate the bleeding ulcer I was sure I could feel forming in the pit of my stomach.

I returned to my room and poked sadly at my TV dinner. It was starting to congeal. A bag of chips would go nicely with it, I decided, and I'd never had any trouble with the food vending machines downstairs, so, to try and salvage the night, I gathered up a handful of change and headed out once more. I could hear Kirk ordering Scotty to beam him up in the background as I pulled the door to my room closed.

Twenty-five, fifty cents plopped into the vending machine. I watched warily as the amount registered on the little green screen. Fifty cents. There it was. I sighed in relief and pressed A4.

Please make another selection.

What? The damn chips were in there. I could see them. I pressed A4 again, a little more vigorously.

Please make another selection.

Oh, God-fucking-dammit. What the fuck? I mean, *what* the *fuck*? What did I ever do to the universe? Hmmm? I mean, really? Did I piss off one of the fates? Did I, like, I dunno, *rape* a vending machine in a past life or something? Had I violated the purity of some poor Coke dispenser or stolen the innocence of a harmless pastry machine and now the vending machines of the world were uniting to carry out their revenge? Had they all been watching me my entire life, awaiting their chance to screw me over they way I screwed them? That must be it. I must have been a vending machine rapist in another life. That would explain it all. That would fucking explain everything.

I punched the coin-return button and jerked the money out of the return slot, dropping most of it. I could feel my eyes welling up. I couldn't believe the stupid vending machines were going to make me cry. It had taken Beth months to manage it. Shaking with fury, I stormed over to the other snack machine, kicking doors and walls as I went. I wanted my damn chips. And I was going to get them.

I forced myself take a few deep, calming breaths before I slid the fifty cents into the machine. My hand shook slightly as I aimed for the coin slot. Twenty-five, fifty cents. It registered. With a long-suffering sigh, I punched in A4.

The bag fell with obscene simplicity into the retrieval slot.

I actually think I shed a tear. It was so beautiful. I could feel a little of the weight lifting from my chest as I slid my hand into the slot, fingertips stretching toward the bag. Maybe I could salvage the god-awful night after all. My dinner could be reheated and I could watch at least thirty minutes of my show and...and the bag was stuck. The *bag* was *stuck*. I'd paid my money, the bag had fallen, and I still wasn't going to get my fucking chips. Nearly blind with rage, I gave the door flap a single, furious kick. The trapped bag burst and slid to the bottom of the compartment. I grabbed it in one quick motion, crushing in my fist the few chips that hadn't been crushed already. I took the stairs to my room two at a time, kicking at random things as I went and muttering angrily to myself.

I half expected—no, half *hoped*—Beth would be back in the room when I got there. I'd make her *think* passive-aggressive. But she wasn't there. The room was empty. Well, except for Kirk, of course. He was giving an inspiring speech to his crew. Fucking bastard. Four hundred men and women traveled with him faithfully around the galaxy, loving him no matter how many were killed following his orders. My stupid roommate wouldn't travel with me to Wal-Mart. Bitch.

I tossed my cold, congealed dinner on the floor in front of the TV, not bothering to reheat it. I wasn't going to enjoy it anyway. Flopping down in front of what was left of Star Trek, I pulled a chip from the crumbled bag, eating it without looking away from the screen. I chewed twice, hesitated, and then swallowed a bit weakly. Slowly, I glanced down.

The entire bag of chips was burnt, charred nearly black.